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King Taejo's Buddhist View and Statecraft in Tenth-Century Korea

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As the founder of the Goryeo (高麗) dynasty (918-1392), King Taejo (太祖, 918-43), whose name was Wang Geon (王建, 877-943), was in favor of Buddhism, composed his own texts, established monastic structures, and performed Buddhist rituals. The purpose of this paper is to examine King Taejo's Buddhist view and his statecraft in tenth-century Korea based on the king's own words, writings, and activities related to Buddhism.

The record shows that the Goryeo people were of the view that Buddhism did not flourish by itself but through the support of the king (*DYSJ* 35: 2b8) or the state (*YNYK* 1996:1,117).¹ King Taejo's Buddhist policy exerted a significant influence until the demise of Goryeo. In addition, Korean Buddhist circles, including the Jogye Order [曹溪宗] of Korean Buddhism,² the mainstream of Buddhism in contemporary Korea, have argued that Buddhism was the state ideology of Goryeo. However, no state religion existed in Goryeo (Yun 2002:50). Although King Taejo showed a deep interest in Buddhism, he did not require his entire kingdom to convert to Buddhism and carried out his religious policy in terms of religious pluralism (Yun 2002:18).³ Therefore, it is significant to examine King Taejo's view of Buddhism for our better understanding of the nature of Buddhism in medieval Korea. Nevertheless, little research on this topic has been done so far.

This paper will examine the following issues: What was the nature of Buddhism during the reign of King Taejo?; What Buddhist activities attracted the king's attention?; In which Buddhist concepts and doctrine was the king interested?; and How did the king's Buddhist view influence his statecraft? To this end, this research will take a text-based approach,⁴

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1. As for an exploration of the nature of state power and religion in Song (960-1279) China and Goryeo Korea, see Vermeersch 2004:4-11.
2. As for the history and the dharma lineage of the school and other impending issues related to it, see Kim 2005:158-59.
3. For a discussion of mid-Goryeo pluralism, see Breuker 2003: 48-84; Breuker 2006; and Breuker 2010. The religious situation of Goryeo was characterized by confusion and complexity, which was completely different from that of the Three Kingdoms period (57 B.C.E.-668 C.E.) and the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) (Yun 2002:50).
4. For an examination of new approaches to research on Korean Buddhist history, see Kim 2010: 45-56.

focusing on the historical records of Goryeo, works related to the king, inscriptions, individual literary works, and *Joseon wangjo sillok* (朝鮮王朝實錄 Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty [1392-1910]).⁵

In particular, *Goryeo sa* (高麗史 The History of Goryeo, 1451, hereafter, *GRS*) is source material by which we can understand the features of the complex religious culture of Goryeo (Yun 2002:2) as well as the most important source material for research on Goryeo Buddhist rituals (Kim 1994:1; Kim 2001:23).⁶ According to *Goryeo Bulgyo gwangye saryojip wonmun* (高麗史佛教關係史料集原文 Collection of Buddhism-related Historical Records in the *GRS*: The Original, hereafter, *GBG*), there are eighteen items related to King Taejo. *Goryeo sa jeoryo* (高麗史節要 Excerpts from the *GRS*, 1452, hereafter, *GRSC*) also contains some items that the *GRS* omitted (Kim 1994:16).

King Taejo himself left some works:⁷ *Jeonggye* (政誠 Admonitions for Politics), *Gye baengnyo seo* (誠百寮書 Letter of Admonitions to All Subjects) (*GRS* 2:12a-b). *Hunyo sipjo* (訓要十條 Ten Injunctions) (*GRS* 2:14b-17a), *Gaetaesa Hwaeom beophoe so* (開泰寺華嚴法會疏 A Prayer Text at the Flower Garland Dharma Assembly in Gaetae Monastery) (*GRS* 2:14a), and inscriptions for eminent monks, including *Heungbeopsa Jingong taesa tapbi* (興法寺真空大師塔碑 Pagoda Inscription for Great Master Jingong of Heungbeop Monastery) (YNYK 1996:1,80-89).

However, the Admonitions for Politics and the Letter of Admonitions

5. For sources of research on the Goryeo period and their limitations, see Kim 1994:12-5; and Kim 2001:32-8. The *Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty* was registered on the UNESCO Memory of the World list in 1997. About the problems of the digitized version, see Kim 2008:193-243.

6. In spite of King Sejong's (1418-50) principle of unbiased writing, presumptuous facts in the *GRS* were in general expurgated (No 2002:72). The book was compiled by Confucian scholars during fourteenth-century Joseon Korea. However, the Confucian scholars valued Confucian culture while belittling indigenous customs, including Buddhism. They applied this method to compile the *GRS* (No 2002:63). In addition, the editors' intention of the Records of Rites (*yeki* 禮志) in the *GRS* needs to be examined in comparison with that of *Gukjo orye ui* (國朝五禮儀 Manual of the Five State Rites, 1474). A comparative examination of the frequency of Buddhist rituals and Confucian counterparts in which King Taejo participated in person will also be of help for a better understanding of the position of Buddhism and Confucianism in Goryeo.

7. John Jorgensen says that only two texts attributed to King Taejo survive: One is his Ten Injunctions; and the other is a prayer text for the opening of Gaetaesa Monastery (Jorgensen 2009).

to All Subjects do not exist (Yi 1991:147; Pak 1991:50-1). In contrast, the contents of the Ten Injunctions are extant. They constituted the basic line of Goryeo's Buddhist policy (Nam 2003:35-6) and have attracted keen attention among Korean and overseas scholars. However, the authenticity of the Injunctions has been in debate among scholars. While Japanese scholars such as Imanishi Ryū criticized their content (Breuker 2008:6), Korean historians, including Yi Byeongdo (Pak 1991:50), accepted them as authentic. It is said that on the basis of the internal evidence, there is no reason to suggest that the Injunctions do not come from Taejo's hand and the only question that remains is why they became part of the public political discourse only after King Hyeonjong's reign (惠宗, 1009-31) (Vermeersch 2008:91-2). However, in his *Forging the Truth*, Remco Breuker expresses doubts about conventional scholarship on the Injunctions.⁸

In his examination of questions of who, how, when, and why regarding the Injunctions (Breuker 2008:1-72), Breuker argues that they were not written by King Taejo but a forgery ascribed to him expertly tailored to fit the needs of eleventh-century Goryeo, in particular, King Hyeonjong (顯宗, 1009-81).⁹ His arguments appear to be quite convincing. King Taejo's own words, "Former king (Gungye 弓裔) [of Taebong 泰封, 901-18]... believed in geomancy in vain and suddenly left Songak to return to Cheorwon" (GRS 1:12a), also support Breuker's arguments. Therefore, I do not include the Ten Injunctions for analysis in this paper. However, it is also of my opinion that the issue of authenticity of the Injunctions still remains for further discussion: The *GRSC* views records that the Injunctions were composed by King Taejo (*GRSC* 1,15:b5-16a8); and it also mentions Doseon (道遜, 827-98), a *Seon* (禪, Chn. *Chan*, Jpn. *Zen*) monk and the founder of geomancy in Korea, in the record of 918, the first year of King Taejo's reign (*GRSC* 1, 1b1-3). This textual evidence testifies to the fact that King Taejo's descendants viewed the Injunctions as composed by the king.

In 940, King Taejo composed A Prayer Text at the Flower Garland

8. Regarding the history of the forging of documents in the world, see Breuker 2008:1-2.

9. Breuker also argues that the fact that the Injunctions have been forged by a later generation does not alter their importance, but merely changes their particulars. The Injunctions are of unsurpassed importance with regard to understanding early Goryeo (Breuker 2008:3). For details, see Breuker 2010:351-406.

Dharma Assembly in Gaetae Monastery (*GRS* 2:14a) in commemoration of Taejo's hard-fought victory over Later Baekje (百濟, 892-936). Gaetae Monastery continued to serve as his personal temple until the end of the dynasty (*GRS* 56:27b-28a). On the day of mourning Taejo went there to perform commemorative rites and when he died, his portrait was enshrined there together with one of his costumes and a jade girdle (*GRS* 40:12b, 14a-b). The prayer text indicates that to repay his debt to the support of the Buddhas in his conquering of Later Baekje, the king founded the temple and decreed that readings of *Hwaeom gyeong* (華嚴經, Chn. *Huayan jing*; Skt. *Avatamsaka Sūtra*) or the *Flower Garland Scripture* were to be held regularly (Vermeersch 2008: 94). There is as yet no universally accepted critical edition of Goryeo inscriptions (Vermeersch 2008:376) and these sources should be used critically and compared with other symbolic expressions of royal power. However, epigraphic material is the best source for ascertaining in what way and to what degree Taejo and his successors used Buddhism as a symbolic prop for their rule (Vermeersch 2008:133).¹⁰ In particular, *Yeokju Namal Yeocho geumseongmun (sang)* (譯註羅末麗初金石文[上] Annotated Translation of Epigraphic Sources from the Ninth to the Tenth Centuries [Volume One], hereafter, *YNYK*)¹¹ is important for the study of the relationship between King Taejo and Buddhism.

The Nature of Buddhism in Early Goryeo

Conventional scholarship has argued that Goryeo was a Buddhist state. However, textual evidence indicates that Buddhism was not the state religion but a dominant religious force (Kim 1994:45-9; Kim 1999: 69-79; Kim 2000: 102-16; Yun 2002:24). In fact, the Goryeo kingdom accepted various religious traditions, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shamanism, astrology, and geomancy since the reign of King Taejo (Kim

10. As for the significance of stele inscriptions of eminent monks as sources for information on Buddhist practices and beliefs, see Vermeersch 2007:115-47.

11. This book is primarily composed of epitaphic sources for Zen monks, which were erected from 937 to the early eleventh centuries, added by inscriptions on pagodas, bells, and Buddha statues (*YNYK* 1996:1,9).

1994:3). In this aspect, Goryeo was quite different from the Christian and Islamic kingdoms during the contemporary period (Yun 2002:24) as well as Joseon Korea.

Goryeo society depended on Buddhism and Goryeo Buddhism assimilated indigenous beliefs (No 2002:63). However, the social order of Goryeo was based on Confucian thought from its beginning (Yun 2002:27). King Taejo also regarded Buddhism as a dominant religion and Confucianism as the ruling ideology (Jeong 1996:316; Yun 2002:31), thus enabling the coexistence of the two religious traditions. Therefore, the view that Buddhism and Confucianism seem to tie in very well with Goryeo's policy on Buddhism (Vermeersch 2008:89) is appropriate.

In particular, one of the most intriguing aspects of Buddhism during the Goryeo period was the abundance and variety of Buddhist rituals (Vermeersch 2008:313). In fact, the most important characteristic of Goryeo Buddhism was that the medieval Korean's essential ideas were expressed in the form of Buddhist rituals. The importance of Goryeo Buddhist rituals for understanding Goryeo society is obvious from the amount of historical records related to Buddhist rituals; the Goryeo king's great concern for them; the amount of funds assigned to them; and the influence of Buddhist customs on the society (Kim 1994:1-3). Nevertheless, as far as the KRS is concerned, in Goryeo, Buddhist rituals were regarded as less important than the great auspicious rituals (*gillye daesa* 吉禮大祀), including *wongu* (圓丘) and *bangtaek* (方澤), which were the Confucian offering rituals to the heavens and earthly gods, respectively, suggesting that Buddhist rituals were not essential, but auxiliary to the greatest rituals of the state (Kim 1994:47).

King Taejo's Buddhist view and his statecraft in relation to Buddhism need to be seen in this context.

King Taejo's Buddhist Activities

As a lay Buddhist follower, King Taejo modeled himself after Emperor Wu [武帝] of Liang (梁, 502-49) (YNYK 1996:1,268) and respected Buddhism and monks YNYK 1996:1, 232-3; YNYK 1, 99; 1, 192-5). Records in the GRS from 918 to 943 point out that King Taejo engaged in various Buddhist activities such as the performance of Buddhist rituals, including *Palgwan hoe*

(八關會 The Assembly of Eight Prohibitions),¹² the most important Goryeo Buddhist ritual, the establishment of temples, the reproduction of the Tripitaka, receptions of foreign monks, offering of tea and incense to monks, the request for the Three Treasures of Silla (新羅, 57 B.C.E.-935 C.E.), the composition of inscriptions in memory of eminent monks and the composition of the prayer text at the dharma assembly in Gaetae Monastery, and leaving behind the Ten Injunctions for descendants (*GBG* 2001:18-19). In addition, other works also indicate that the king was also interested in instituting monastic offices, receiving Bodhisattva precepts, and praying for a prince.

In the following, I will examine King Taejo's Buddhist activities, focusing on those that are considered significant to his statecraft, which include Buddhist concepts and doctrine affiliated with the king, the reception of bodhisattva precepts, the construction of temples, the institution of Buddhist offices, and the performance of Buddhist rituals.

Buddhist Concepts and Doctrine

Records indicate that King Taejo was familiar with the Buddhist concepts of *Tao* (enlightenment), self-perfection, good action, mind (*YNYK* 1996:1,34), karmic affinity (*YNYK* 1996:1,34), five fulfillment (*oyeon* 五衍) (*YNYK* 1996:1,194), Buddha-nature (*YNYK* 1996:1,93), compassion (*YNYK* 1996:1,34), the ten stages (*YNYK* 1996:174), a humane king (*YNYK* 1996:35), emptiness (*YNYK* 1996:85), the realm of form [*samseon* 三禪] (*YNYK* 1996:1,195), and Zen practice (*YNYK* 1996:1,63).

The attainment of *Tao* or enlightenment or self-perfection has been the common goal of Buddhists for ages. Mind, good action, five conducts, compassion, emptiness, and Buddha-nature are important concepts emphasized by East Asian Buddhist traditions. The notion of ten stages is stressed in the *Flower Garland Scripture* and the realm of form and Zen practice are, in particular, related to *Seon* Buddhism. Therefore, we can conclude that King

12. For the textual origins of the Assembly of Eight Prohibitions, its historical development, practice, cultural assimilation, significance, nature, and social role, see Kim 1994:170-267; Kim 2001:143-205.

Taejo was familiar with some key Buddhist concepts and his particular interest was in the Seon and the Hwaeom schools. The concept of a humane king indicates that King Taejo was aware of the idea of *cakravartinrāja*, a Buddhist ideal king. In addition, a record of 1056 also infers that purity was another of important Buddhist concepts that attracted King Taejo's attention.¹³

In particular, King Taejo's philosophical interest in Buddhism can be examined through his conversation with Great Master Gwangja (廣慈, 864-945). The king asked the master, "You said that mind is the Buddha. What do you mean by that mind?" The master responded, "A person who reached *nirvāṇa* will not stay in the mind of the Buddha." The king said, "By what process did the Buddha reach that stage?" The master answered, "The Buddha never took any particular process. Mind itself has no process" (YNYK 1996:1,193-4). From these passages, King Taejo asked two questions about mind and how to get to *nirvāṇa*, i.e., Buddhist soteriology, which are regarded as crucial in terms of Buddhist philosophy.

In addition, there is a high possibility that King Taejo understood Buddhism through the lens of Confucianism. This is because there are precedents for this. Choe Chiwon (崔致遠, 857-?), a polymath of later Silla, quoted King Heongang (憲康王, 875-86) and said that the Confucian five norms equaled the Buddhist five precepts, a view borrowed from Chinese Buddhist apologists (YKP 1:162, recited from Vermeersch 2008:88). An eminent monk of Goryeo who flourished during the reign of King Taejo also supports this. In his admonitions on his deathbed, Great Master Jingong said, "Monks and men of manners should respect their seniors as their parents and love their juniors like their children (YNYK 1996:1,66) emphasizing the significance of filial piety, an important Confucian virtue.

It is important to examine the cosmology of the Goryeo people in the historical context (No 2002:66). It is said that the world view reflected in King Taejo's prayer text at Gaetae Monastery was the worldview depicted in the *Flower Garland Scripture* as well as that of the Goryeo people (Heo 1990:14-5). However, cosmological theories during the Goryeo period were multiple and they were composed of multidimensional cosmology, China-centered

13. King Munjong (文宗, 1046-83) issued a stringent indictment of misdemeanors in the Buddhist order: Purity takes precedence in the teaching of the Buddha (GRS 7, 40a6-7).

cosmology, and Korea-centered cosmology. These three types of cosmology coexisted in Goryeo and played a significant role in the making of diplomatic decisions and the establishment of a new political system. In particular, the multidimensional cosmology constituted the mainstream of cosmology of Goryeo, forming a characteristic feature of Goryeo society (No 2002:64-6).

Buddhist Activities

King Taejo received Buddhist precepts, constructed temples, instituted monastic offices, and performed Buddhist rituals.

King Taejo called himself *bosal gye ja* (菩薩戒弟子 a disciple who received bodhisattva precepts).¹⁴ In addition, as a lay disciple of Great Master Beopgyeong (*YNYK* 1996:1,141) one of the Four Fearless Great Masters of Korea (*YNYK* 1996:1,131), the king also paid respect to Seon Master Jajeok (慈寂) and took refuge with him (*YNYK* 1996:1,98). The king also hoped his descendants would follow him (*YNYK* 1996:1,85). As a result, after King Taejo, Goryeo kings also received bodhisattva precepts throughout the dynasty. In particular, according to the *GRS*, all kings following King Deokjong (德宗, 1031-34) in the mid-eleventh century received the precepts, and mid-Goryeo kings received them as many as five to six times during their reign (Nam 2003:43).

Among King Taejo's Buddhist activities, what showed the king's deep devotion was the construction of monasteries. In particular, King Taejo built ten monasteries, including Beobwangsa (法王寺) and Wangnyunsa (興王寺), both in the capital area, Gaegyeong (開京), in 919. The king also built additional monasteries throughout his reign, which included Gaetaesa (*GBG* 2001:17-8). Taejo also adopted the office of the Buddhist preceptor from China and perhaps even India for his own purposes and created the additional office of Royal Preceptor to emphasize the strong bond between

14. *Sinseong wang chinje Gaetaesa Hwaeom beophoe so* (A Prayer Text at the Flower Garland Dharma Assembly in Gaetae Monastery, Which Was Composed by the Divine and Sacred King [King Taejo]), *Donginji mun saryuk* (Four-Six Couplet of the Eastern People [Koreans]), fascicle 6, section 8, *KMC* 5:89 (The number of a fascicle and a page of the *Dongin ji mun saryuk* in the *KMC* 5 is illegible). Its abbreviation is recorded in *Dongnam* (Gazetteer of Korea) 18: 16a5-b3, *SDYS* 1981:304.

the dynasty and Buddhism (Vermeersch 2008:267).

Following the customs of Silla (Kim 1994:43), King Taejo demonstrated great devotion to Buddhist rituals. According to the *GBG*, records on the relationship between King Taejo and Buddhist ritual occur four times: two times of the Assembly of Eight Prohibitions, one time of the Non-Confined Great Assembly (*muchā taehoe* 無遮大會), and one time of the dharma assembly in Gaetae Monastery. However, the number of rituals held throughout King Taejo's reign was much more than that recorded in the *GRS*. This is because the introductory remarks to that history indicate that common events like the Assembly of Eight Prohibitions were recorded only when they first occurred (Kim 1994:192).

In particular, the first record on the Assembly of Eight Prohibitions in the *GRS* appears in 919, the second year of King Taejo's reign. Therefore, it is certain that King Taejo was interested in the Assembly from the initial period of his reign. The Non-Confined Great Assembly was held in 940 for seven days after the reconstruction of Sinheung Monastery [新興寺]. From that year on, the assembly became an annual event by royal order. In the same year, a dharma assembly was also held in celebration of the building of Gaetae Monastery.

In sum, as a self-proclaimed Buddhist disciple, King Taejo received bodhisattva precepts, was aware of some key Buddhist concepts through the lens of Confucianism and a multidimensional cosmology, supported the Seon and Hwaeom schools, built monastic structures, instituted Buddhist offices, and performed Buddhist rituals.

King Taejo's Politics and Buddhism

Goryeo's legitimating policy was covered mainly by Buddhism (Vermeersch 2008:82) and King Taejo's Buddhist activities developed in close relation to his statecraft in tenth-century Korea. Records on the conversation between King Taejo and high-ranking monks demonstrate a close relationship between King Taejo's politics and Buddhism.¹⁵ King Taejo asked Great

15. A close relationship between religion and the state is also found in the Later Roman Empire

Master Beopgyeong (法鏡), “How can I deal with the people who are like children?” The master responded to the king, “Protect Buddhism (*hobeop* 護法) with utmost sincerity and have mercy on the people. Then, the state will flourish” (YNYK 1996:1,117). Great Master Jincheol (眞澈) also said to King Taejo, “A humane king wishes to protect the [Buddhist] teaching. Please bestow favors on the people and accumulate blessings” (YNYK 1996: 1,35). King Taejo replied the master, “Your teaching will lead us to the realm of heavenly beings” (YNYK 1996:34). The king also asked Great Master Gwangja, “How can I provide the people with safety?” The master said, “You should always remember the question that you asked today” (YNYK 1996:1,194).

This section of King Taejo’s Politics and Buddhism will examine the relationship between King Taejo’s Buddhist view and his statecraft, focusing on the issues of why, what, and how, followed by some evaluation of the king’s Buddhist policy.

Reasons for King Taejo’s Favor for Buddhism

King Taejo’s thoughts well reflect how secular powers viewed Buddhism at that time. He noted that Buddhist thoughts were so deeply embedded in the thoughts of Silla people that they believed that life or death, fortune or misfortune depended entirely on the Buddha (Nam 2003:35). As the founder of the Goryeo dynasty, King Taejo’s prime concern was with the strengthening of his weak kingship during a time of political difficulties and the succession of his kingship to his descendants. To unite the state (YNYK 1996:1,307) gaining the hearts of the people, the king used Buddhism as part of his political tactics. An absolute kingdom, the Goryeo state focused on securing the royal household based on the divine right of kings. In particular, for Goryeo royal families, the transfer of royal lineage for generations had been regarded as the most important benefit received from ancestors (Kim 1994:33). Therefore, religious traditions were also requested to fulfill this goal in Goryeo (Yun 2002:49-50).

(284-610) (Nuffelen 2008:135), in Byzantine political history (Spanos 2008:134), and in Egypt (Quack 2008:134).

Political milieu

King Taejo founded the Goryeo dynasty, but his power base was relatively weak. In fact, his success in reunifying the country was the consequence of his ability to put together a confederation of powerful aristocrats, entering into marriage with no fewer than twenty-nine women, nearly all daughters of powerful local aristocrats (Duncan 1988:40; Duncan 2000:18-19; Yun 2002:16). However, the bulk of the countryside remained under the control of local strongmen who still controlled private military forces and retained the trappings of independent local governance. Therefore the most immediate challenge for the new dynasty lay in curbing the power of the central confederates and enhancing the authority and prestige of the kingship (Duncan 2000:267-68). Therefore, the king had spent most of his life putting down local resistance in some form or other. For example, in 936, King Taejo was still in the situation of repelling villains and quelling revolts (YNYK 1996:1,268). Like his Admonitions for Politics and the Letter of Admonitions to All Subjects (Yi 1991:147; Pak 1991:50-1), for King Taejo, Buddhism primarily served as part of his strategy for coping with such difficult political circumstances.

King Taejo's view of the people

The *GRS* indicates that Goryeo kings recognized commoners as the root of the state and the primary state affair was to keep the people's lives at peace. Thus, they considered their own lack of virtue as the primary cause of various disasters (Kim 1994:50). However, the kings paid lip service to the people and reality was different. Against the Buddhist spirit, in which people are considered equal in essence, the king and the people in medieval Korea were not on equal standing in reality and the former was viewed superior to the latter. King Taejo's perspective in this regard was not exceptional. The king himself viewed the people as foolish (*sogin mi eo wolli* 俗人迷於原理) (YNYK 1996:1,34) and childlike (YNYK 1996:1,117) Therefore, it is conceivable that King Taejo used Buddhism as a means to gain the hearts of the people. In his work, Choe Ja (崔滋, 1188-1260) supports this argument:

When King Taejo first founded the dynasty amid continuous fighting, he relied on the principle of *eum* (陰, Chn. *yin*: the negative cosmic force) and *yang* (陽, the positive cosmic force) and Buddhism. Counselor Choe

Eung (崔凝, 898-932) remonstrated, “I have never heard of gaining the hearts of the people by relying on Buddhism and the principle of *eum* and *yang*.” The king responded, “How can I not know that? But the mountains and streams of our country are holy and mysterious, and our people live in remote villages. Thus our people like Buddhas and gods and seek from them good fortune... Now there is ceaseless fighting and there is no security, so people are constantly in fear and do not know what to do. I only think that the hidden aid of Buddhas and gods as well as the divine response of the mountains and streams will be a makeshift. How can I use this as the great principle to govern the country and gain the hearts of the people? After we settle these conflicts and live in peace and justice, then we can change our customs and beautify morality.” (*BHJ* 1986: 1,1a3-b1)

In short, as the ruler King Taejo’s primary concern was with the eternity of his kingdom. However, his power base was weak. Therefore, to strengthen his kingship, King Taejo used Buddhism to win the hearts of the people whom he regarded as foolish or childlike. So, what was King Taejo’s understanding of Buddhism?

King Taejo’s Understanding of Buddhism

King Taejo was cognizant of some Buddhist concepts and doctrine. He was also interested in publishing Buddhist texts and keeping Buddhist precepts while constructing temples and performing Buddhist rituals. King Taejo understood Buddhism as a religion for invoking blessings and fulfilling his political purpose.

View of buddhist concepts and doctrine

As discussed earlier, King Taejo was aware of some key Buddhist concepts. However, we are left without any textual evidence that the king applied these Buddhist concepts to his political reality. In particular, the concept of karmic retribution and the idea of Buddhist merits prevailed among the population in medieval Korea. It was also widely believed in Goryeo that noble blood and high posts were the results of pious deeds accumulated in their previous lifetimes (Nam 2003:46-53). This was the same for King Taejo. The king’s concern was not with such Buddhist philosophical systems of thought as the Four Noble Truths but with the theory of karmic retribution, which is

regarded as a skill-in-means developed for people of lower spiritual faculty.

King Taejo said to Great Master Jingong, “I have been devoted to military arts from childhood and my learning [in Buddhism] is not sufficient” (YNYK 1996:1.84-85). From this passage, we can recognize that the king’s knowledge of Buddhism was not in depth. In addition, King Taejo’s view of Buddhist teaching was different from that of monarchs in other countries. King Aśoka (274-236 B.C.E.) of India, whose effort made Buddhism transmitted beyond India, took refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddhism, and became a staunch Buddhist. Unlike King Taejo, what attracted his attention was not external elements such as ritual and regulations but internal growth and self-perfection. However, King Aśoka shared a common feature with King Taejo in that he was not interested in the basic teachings of the Buddha, including the Four Noble Truths and the Theory of Dependent Origination, but in other Buddhist elements to fit the needs of the lay people (Chen 1994:137-42). Emperor Taizung (太宗, 976-97) of Song China understood Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching, including the concept of emptiness, quite accurately (Kim 2002:170). However, no record indicates that King Taejo had an in-depth knowledge of Buddhist doctrine.

View of buddhist texts

For King Taejo, Buddhist scriptures were not for learning Buddhist doctrine but for making merit, in which the king was different from Prince Shōtoku (聖德, ?-622) of Japan, who delivered lecture on Buddhist scriptures such as the *Lotus Sūtra* [法華經] and emphasized universal equality and devotional life for saving sentient beings (Chen 1994:200-01).

King Taejo said to Great Master Jeongjin (靜眞), “Dharma Master Xuanzang [玄奘, 602-64] [of China]... translated Buddhist canonical texts and kept them into depositories for valuables in secrecy” (YNYK 1996:268-69). In Baekje (18 B.C.E.-660 C.E.), Buddhist scriptures were also copied with wishes for security and happiness (Ahn 1989:13). King Taejo also asked the master Jeongjin, “A battle has just ended and so we can promote Buddhist teaching. I want a set (*ilbon* 一本) of the *Tripitaka* to be copied again and put them in the two capitals, Gaegyeong and Seogyeong (西京). What do you think of it?” The master said, “That will be a real merit” (YNYK 1996:1,269). In addition, a record of 942 indicates that Great Master Beobin (法印) lectured on the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* for the

purpose of vanishing natural calamities and enjoying a rich harvest (YNYK 1996:1,307). King Taejo also prayed for the peace of the people and the fulfillment of political matters as a result of delivering lecture on the *Flower Garland Scripture* at the dharma assembly in Gaetae Monastery (KMC 5:89-91). From this textual evidence, we can say that, for King Taejo, Buddhist canonical texts served not as texts for studying Buddhist teaching but as a means of praying for secular merit.

View of buddhist ethics

King Taejo received bodhisattva precepts and attempted to live up to them, but his attempt ended in failure. King Taejo once confessed to State Preceptor, Ieom (利嚴, 870-936), that he as the ruler was troubled with his acts against Buddhist precepts, which meant the destruction of many lives by him. However, Ieom reassured the king while saying that the ruler's conduct could not be judged according to the same norms as those of the ordinary people. For a ruler, it was acceptable to mobilize troops for the benefit of the people (YNYK 1:34). King Beopheung (法興王, 514-40) of Silla prohibited the killing of living beings in 555 (HBJ 6,95b17-18; SGSG 1,71). King Beop (法王, 599-600) of Baekje did the same and ordered the release of domestic hawks and sparrow hawks, and the burning of fishing tools (SGYS 1987:206-7). In addition, unlike Goryeo, during the Liao dynasty (遼, 916-1125), a contemporary state that influenced Goryeo Buddhism, it was customary for Buddhist believers to ordain their eldest sons. Even in its decay when the government needed to mobilize all its manpower, the Liao government still admonished Buddhist monks and nuns against breaking their vows (Wittfogel and Feng 1961:294-95). However, unlike these examples, the record indicates that King Taejo used Buddhism for his political purpose against Buddhist precepts. So, what was King Taejo's strategy for executing his Buddhist policy?

Strategies for Executing Buddhist Policy

The Goryeo government used the policy of carrot and stick with respect to Buddhism (Nam 2003:53). In particular, King Taejo's Buddhist policy was political and practical in character. As strategies for executing his Buddhist policy, King Taejo received bodhisattva precepts, supported monastic

circles while controlling them through the institution of monastic offices, and performed Buddhist events. King Taejo used Buddhism as a tool to overcome his political difficulties during his reign, but this resulted in criticism by historians in later generations.

Reception of bodhisattva precepts

King Taejo's reception of bodhisattva precepts was a political product. King Taejo regarded himself as a lay Buddhist disciple. However, this did not mean that Buddhist power was superior to royal power during his reign.

The Buddhist attempt to sanctify royal authority by identifying the king as a Buddha or a bodhisattva emerged around in China in the fifth century and in Korea in the sixth century (Nam 2003:41). The Chinese monk Faguo in 419 was the first to formulate the idea clearly, when he stated that Emperor Taizu of the Northern Wei dynasty (北魏, 386-534)¹⁶ was a Tathāgata. In 567, Wei Yuansong (衛元嵩) also proposed that the ruler of the Northern Zhou dynasty (北周, 556-81) was a living Tathāgata. However, many Buddhist monks, particularly in the south of China, seem to have been uncomfortable with these novelties. In addition, Emperor Wen (文帝, 581-604) of the Sui dynasty (隋, 581-618) also took the layman's bodhisattva vows and was called "Bodhisattva Son of Heaven," but he seems never to have called himself a Tathāgata or a bodhisattva in a serious sense (Farquhar 1978:9-11). This seems to have been the same with King Taejo. Although he claimed to be a disciple who received bodhisattva precepts, the king appears not to have observed those precepts on the grounds that he was the ruler. This suggests King Taejo received bodhisattva precepts as a means to gain the hearts of the silly people who had believed in Buddhism.¹⁷

16. There was no emperor named Taizu (太祖) in the Northern Wei dynasty. The Taizu by Farquhar is considered Emperor Mingyuan (明元帝, 409-23) (Yi 2005: 36, 123).

17. The Jijang bosal to (地藏菩薩圖 Painting of Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha), a painting from the early fourteenth century, depicts a bodhisattva and King Taejo, performing a deep bow on his knees. It is said that this painting demonstrates how Buddhists of the period revered religious power over secular power (Nam 2003:43). However, as we discussed earlier, royal power took precedence over Buddhist power during the reign of King Taejo.

Support of the sangha

Like in China, Buddhism in Korea relied on land as its main economic foundation (Nam 2003: 38). Taejo granted land in exchange for ideological or material support of monks for his new dynasty (Vermeersch 2008:288). In response, monastic circles echoed the state policy. The Buddhist clergy cooperated with, rather than confronting, secular power (Nam 2003:53). Many monks affiliated with King Taejo also played a significant role in the political arena. The monk Ieom is a typical example of its kind. Many high-ranking monks during the reign of King Taejo yielded to the king's wishes serving as thaumaturges¹⁸ rather than as specialists in Buddhist doctrine. In addition, monasteries in Goryeo owned even slaves: A record of 1281 indicates that National Preceptor Wono (圓悟, 1215-86) composed a document of slaves (Jo 2009).

King Taejo's support of Buddhist denominations, focusing on the Seon and Hwaeom schools, was also political. The activities of doctrinal schools were minimal except for the Hwaeom school. The Hwaeom school attempted to regain its popularity through sponsorship by King Taejo. In particular, Huirang (希郎, ?-) supported King Taejo during the Later Three Kingdoms period (892-936) and Tanmun developed into an eminent monk with the support of the king (Choe 1999:34). The foundation of Gaetae Monastery also shows King Taejo's deep interest in the Hwaeom school. The king made Yuneon and Seungdam stay in the monastery and open the dharma assembly every summer and winter.

However, King Taejo was, in particular, affiliated with many Seon monks.¹⁹ It was not because the king had a special interest in their teaching, but because the Seon monks were connected with local strongmen (Choe 1999:25-8). Yi Kyubo (李奎報, 1168-1241) also asserted that the reason why King Taejo favored Seon over other Buddhist schools was because it was more effective in repelling invaders (*DYSJ* 1986:25,10a6-10b7). In the same context, Yi also argued that it was more effective to feed one Seon monk than ten thousand soldiers (*DYSJ* 1986:25,13a7-8)

18. Official inscriptions from the late ninth century also point out that the preceptors continued to be seen as thaumaturges (Vermeersch 2008:244).

19. From the mid-ninth century on, all State Preceptors were Seon monks (Vermeersch 2008:245).

Control of monastic administration

The Korean Saṅgha was not an autonomous entity, as was the case for the Catholic Church in medieval Europe (Vermeersch 2008:203). King Taejo controlled monastic administrations for his political purposes. From the very beginning of Goryeo the king claimed the right to appoint abbots (Vermeersch 2008:219). In addition, the Goryeo rulers had much more effective control over the appointment of abbots than their Chinese counterparts (Vermeersch 2004:9). A record of Goryeo also indicates,

The reason why the state stipulated the rank system for Buddhist monks was to respect outstanding monks like a dragon or a Chinese phoenix... How do I [King Taejo] as the ruler spare to select such figures who will bring blessings to the state?" (*DYSJ* 1986: 34,12a8-17).

Another record also points out that the reason why the king respected high monks was to expect benefit from them and request them to devote themselves to benefitting the country (*DYSJ* 1986:34,12a2-5).

King Taejo's policy of Buddhist offices was different from that of Silla. Silla temples served as venues for state-supported cults and constituted the backbone of the administrative system supervising all temples in the country. However, the system of temple-based overseers in Silla was replaced by a completely new system under King Taejo (Vermeersch 2008:213). The state placed the Buddhist community under secular control, and by controlling the bureaucracy and clergy, the king became the only entity exercising both secular and religious power (Nam 2003:53).

Performance of buddhist events

King Taejo was much interested in constructing temples. Originally, Buddhist temples were for spiritual cultivation. However, those built during the king's reign primarily served as prayer temples for the solace of deceased royal ancestors or for the living royalty.

Buddhist rituals, including the Assembly of Eight Prohibitions, held during the reign of King Taejo were performed for his secular and political purposes. A record of 926 indicates that King Taejo invited National Preceptor Beobin and requested him to pray for the queen to give birth to a prince. The preceptor burned incense in a golden burner, opened Buddhist

texts, and prayed for the queen to give an easy birth to a boy (YNYK 1996:1,306). Another record also points out that when grasshoppers caused damage to agriculture in Hwanghae Province in 942, Great Master Beobin lectured on the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* and the calamities vanished, thus leading to a rich harvest in that year (YNYK 1996:1,307). These examples refer to that the nature of Buddhist ritual altered in Goryeo to meet the needs of the time.

In particular, the eight Buddhist prohibitive precepts were originally the monthly six days' observances of Buddhist devotees for the purification of the three kinds of actions by body, speech, and mind to achieve the religious goal, enlightenment. However, the original meaning and function of the eight Buddhist precepts changed in Goryeo. The Goryeo Assembly of Eight Prohibitions was primarily performed for royal longevity and ancestor worship, a special characteristic different from its precursors in other countries (Kim 1994:239).

The target audience of ritual differed on occasions.²⁰ It is certain that the target audience of the Goryeo Assembly of Eight Prohibitions was the royal family and government officials (Kim 1994:200). In addition, Goryeo Buddhist rituals were auxiliary to great auspicious rituals.

In short, King Taejo received bodhisattva precepts to win the hearts of the people, and the support of the monastic circles, focusing on the Seon school, which was linked with local strongmen and viewed as effective in repelling invaders. In contrast, the king also controlled them under his rule. He also constructed temples and performed Buddhist rituals to fulfill his secular wishes, including the birth of a prince, royal longevity, and ancestor worship.

Historical evaluation of King Taejo's buddhist policy

Ancient religions before the emergence of classical religions, including Buddhism, were characterized by the invocation of blessings. However, Asian saints such as Laozu and Confucius as well as the Buddha were not

20. While all levels of society participated in imperial ceremonies in the Later Roman Empire (284-610) (Nuffelen 2008: 135), Egyptian royal rituals were performed in much more restricted circles or even by the king almost alone (Quack 2008: 134).

interested in invoking them. The systematization of classical religions also brought about their secularization. Religion during the Goryeo dynasty was also secularized (Yun 2002:22) and Buddhism during the reign of King Taejo was not exceptional in this regard.

So, what was the evaluation of King Taejo's Buddhist policy by later generations? Their evaluation was not positive. A historian during the Joseon dynasty said,

King Taejo built ten monasteries in the capital area within a year after founding his kingdom and fixed pagodas and shrines in the two capitals... Did he do it out of his fear of the theory of cause and effect? At that time, the two strong kingdoms [Silla and Later Baekje] were not yet pacified. In addition, [enemies in] many fortresses did not capitulate, the war was not over, and the scars of war were not yet recovered. Why did he hurry such wanton Buddhist activities? (GRSC 1,15:b5-10).

Another historian said,

When King Taejo built Gaetae Monastery, its luxury went to extremes. The king completed it accompanied by many monks and composed a prayer text in celebration of its construction. It is really regrettable that Buddhism made the hearts of the people uneasy... King Taejo was honorable and correct in action and words. Nevertheless, he was imbued with Buddhist manners, not to mention others inferior to him... The king said, "The reckless construction of temples accelerated the ruin of Silla." Did he utter these words after he regretted his rash action only late in his career? King Taejo left his dying injunction that future generations should believe in Buddhism. Following his words, his descendants had highly respected Buddhism so that 70,000 (*chilman se* 七萬歲)²¹ of rice a day were donated to feed monks at 30,000 temples (GRSC 1, 15b5-16a8).

Even though they were anti-Buddhist Confucian scholars, there is some truth in what they said.

In sum, King Taejo was aware of some key Buddhist concepts and

21. "Se" is considered "seok" (石). One *seok* is equivalent to 5.12 U.S. bushels and 70,000 *seok* is tantamount to 358,400 U.S. bushels.

doctrine. However, with emphasis on the theory of cause and effect, the king was not interested in the early teachings of the Buddha but in Buddhist events. King Taejo took a “to protect but control” policy toward Buddhist circles. While supporting them, he also controlled monastic administration, coined Buddhist ethics, and regarded Buddhist texts as a means of making merit for his political purposes. In response, the monastic circles temporized with the king’s policy. Buddhist events held during the reign of King Taejo also did not aim at spiritual cultivation but at fulfilling the secular wishes of royalty. In addition, historical evaluation of King Taejo’s Buddhist policy was negative.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine King Taejo’s Buddhist view and his statecraft in tenth-century Korea based on his own words, writings, and activities related to Buddhism. To that end, this research examined the nature of Buddhism during the king’s reign, his Buddhist activities, and the relationship between his politics and Buddhism. I came to a conclusion that: Buddhism during King Taejo’s reign was not the state religion but a dominant religion; the king possibly understood Buddhism through the lens of Confucianism and a multidimensional cosmology; King Taejo was familiar with such key Buddhist concepts as Buddha-nature, emptiness, enlightenment, and mind or Mahāyāna Buddhist schools, including the Seon and the Flower Garland Schools. However, his prime concern was not with early teachings of the Buddha, including the Four Noble Truths, but with such skill-in-means as the theory of karmic retribution, and Buddhist events, which contained the construction of temples and the performance of Buddhist rituals; and the king used Buddhism while coining Buddhist ethics for his secular purposes, including royal longevity, and putting Buddhist circles under his control; and the Buddhist circles ingratiated themselves with the king’s Buddhist policy in exchange for their sustenance, which tradition continued down to the end of the Goryeo dynasty. This conclusion suggests the need for an in-depth examination of the nature of Korean Buddhism in particular, and by extension, that of Asian Buddhism in general.

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Abstract

This paper examines King Taejo's Buddhist view and his statecraft in tenth-century Korea based on his own words, writings, and activities related to Buddhism. To that end, this research investigates the nature of Buddhism during the king's reign, his Buddhist activities, and the relationship between his politics and Buddhism. I came to a conclusion that: Buddhism during King Taejo's reign was not the state religion but a dominant religion; the king possibly understood Buddhism through the lens of Confucianism and a multidimensional cosmology; the king's prime concern was not with the early teachings of the Buddha, including the Four Noble Truths, but with such skill-in-means as the theory of karmic retribution and Buddhist events, which contained the construction of temples and the performance of Buddhist rituals; and the king used Buddhism while coining Buddhist ethics for his secular purposes, including royal longevity, and putting Buddhist circles under his control; and the Buddhist circles ingratiated themselves with the king's Buddhist policy in exchange for their sustenance, which tradition continued down to the end of the Goryeo dynasty.

Keywords: Buddhism, Confucianism, statecraft, Taejo, tenth-century Korea

